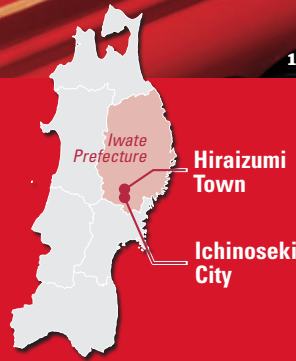




The Deep Mochi Culture of Iwate



Mochi is a traditional Japanese food enjoyed around the country. In Iwate Prefecture, however, a unique culture of mochi has developed and been passed down from generation to generation for some 400 years.

SATO KUMIKO

Mochi, which is traditionally prepared by steaming glutinous rice, pounding it in a wooden or a stone mortar until it becomes sticky, and rounding or flattening it, has been considered a sacred food since ancient times. Even today, all over Japan, eating or offering mochi is a custom associated with significant events such as the New Year. In Iwate

- 1 A typical example of a *mochi honzen* full-course dinner
2-4 Mochi dishes presented at the Nationwide Local Mochi Specialties Summit
5 Numerous mochi dishes
6 Mochi dishes presented at a regional event

Photos: Courtesy of Ichinoseki City (1, 5); Courtesy of Executive Committee of the National Mochi Festival (2-4, 6)

Prefecture, however, some places have such a characteristic culture of mochi cuisine that they have a mochi calendar that requires local people to eat mochi on particular days throughout the year.

Ichinoseki City and Hiraizumi Town were once the territory of the Sendai domain that ruled the stretch of land from what is now southern Iwate Prefecture to Miyagi Prefecture and northern Fukushima Prefecture during the Edo period (1603-1867). The first lord of the domain, Date Masamune, is known as an outstanding samurai general who laid the foundations of the domain's prosperity with numerous policies.

According to Sato Koki, Chairman of the Ichinoseki Mochi Culture Promotion Council, "Based on an order from the Sendai domain, farmers were required to make mochi and offer it to the gods on Days 1 and 15 of every month. I think that it was one of the domain's policies on cultural promotion featuring locally produced glutinous rice." This practice spread to ordinary citizens as well, to the extent people were eating mochi more than sixty days a year, including at seasonal events, leading to the creation of the "mochi calendar."

"The protocol associated with mochi cuisine originated from samurai culture, which places importance on etiquette. Even today, detailed etiquette exists for mochi cuisine on ceremonial occasions. Because my wife is from a different part of Sendai domain than I am, she was confused early on in our marriage," says Sato.

Mochi honzen was a full-course dinner eaten at banquets and other such occasions by the samurai of the Date domain. Honzen cuisine is a formal meal for celebratory and similar events, said to have originated with the samurai etiquette of the Muromachi period (1333-1573). Although the Sendai domain complied with this protocol, it also invented mochi honzen, a formal meal based on mochi. The meal included a range of mochi dishes such as *zoni*, a soup containing *anko* (red bean paste) and mochi, as well as *zunda* (mashed beans) and *june* (mochi mixed with ingredients like perilla and freshwater shrimp).

Mochi honzen meals are hosted by a person called the *otorimochiyaku*. After the *otorimochiyaku* says, "I am very happy to have all of you here today," people enjoy eating their mochi meal while following instructions from the *otorimochiyaku*.


"Our food culture seems unique in the eyes of people in other regions. The local people said that mochi was everywhere around the country. But we came to consider that mochi culture in Ichinoseki and Hiraizumi could be said to be a local food culture that is peculiar to this region," says Sato.

The Ichinoseki Mochi Culture Promotion Council, which was established in 2010, holds seminars to teach mochi culture through lectures and practice, and since 2012 has held the Nationwide Local Mochi Specialties Summit, gathering characteristic local mochi from all over the country in one place. (The next summit will be held as the National Mochi Festival in the spring of 2021.) In 2016, Ichinoseki and Hiraizumi were designated as "SAVOR JAPAN" (farm stay areas communicating food culture overseas) by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries of the Japanese government.

In recent years, mochi dishes in Ichinoseki and Hiraizumi, which were originally adorned with colorful seasonal ingredients, are said to include an even greater variety of ingredients including cheese, tomato and curry, and now number more than 300.

"Mochi dishes have become extremely casual. However, we would like to properly pass the background of the creation of the culture of mochi cuisine and our long-standing tradition to future generations," says Sato.

At specialty restaurants and Japanese-style inns in Ichinoseki and Hiraizumi, you can eat casual *mochi gozen* (a bowl of mochi) or, if you make a reservation, authentic mochi honzen meals following the traditional etiquette, including a message from the *otorimochiyaku*.

If you ever have the opportunity to visit Ichinoseki or Hiraizumi, why not enjoy more than 400 years of culinary history and culture along with all its flavors? 

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